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Birthday Blessings

Tipitaka Yaw Sayadaw

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Translated from the Myanmar
by TAF
in collaboration with Nyein Nyein Chan Chan

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A GIFT OF DHAMMA—NOT FOR SALE

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Contents

To be free from misdeeds, make merit. 1

A birthday is an “aging-day.” 2

The purpose of celebrating birthdays as “aging-days” is to foster courage. 3

The death-day isn’t far from the birthday. 4

Aging is unceasing. 5

If we deny aging, we’ll end up feeling dejected. 6

The older, the more favorable and peaceful. 7

The auspiciousness of birth, aging, illness, and death. 8

A birthday is also Dhamma. 9

There is no escape from aging, illness, and death. 11

A birthday blessing gem. 13

Glossary 15

Tipitaka Yaw Sayadaw 17

To be free from misdeeds, make merit.

We tend to think fondly about the birthday that brought us to our current life. We feel gratified and heartened knowing that our *kusala kamma* from a previous life bore good fruit that enabled us to attain a human life. But the job of kusala is not finished with that alone. We can also strive to elevate the very quality of this life.

We were able to attain a human existence due to the merit that resulted from avoiding misdeeds in the past, and we should try to be heedful to live in a way so as to avoid misdeeds now. It is only through suffering shame and distress as a result of committing some misdeed or another that we can have a real understanding of how great it feels to be free from such misdeeds. Now that we've gained a human existence due to the good results of kusala, it is especially important for us to do good for the benefit of ourselves, the benefit of others, the Buddha's dispensation, and the benefit of the world at large. If we can become skillful at performing kusala, we will surely be free from misdeeds.

A birthday is an "aging-day."

A person's true birthday is the day they are pushed out of their mother's womb while incoherently weeping, wailing, and screaming, "wah-wah." If we wanted to celebrate an actual birthday, it would have to be held on the day we were born. But we wouldn't be able to understand anything for ourselves at that point. And it would be a lackluster affair if our parents were to give us a birthday party then because they wouldn't yet know what sort of person we were going to become or what sort of character and abilities we were going to end up with.

Every year when that day comes around, we call it our "birthday" as a figure of speech because it shares the same date as the day on which we were born. Actually, because we become older and perhaps more beaten down each year, we can make it a day for acknowledging our aging. We can say our birthdays are ″aging-days." But whatever we call it, these are just terms. What's important is the Dhamma behind the terms, which points to the true nature of things and allows us to put an end to our suffering.

The purpose of celebrating birthdays as "aging-days" is to foster courage.

A *puthujjana* wants solely to acquire. They want to gain a lot, and they want to gain all the time, without ever suffering loss. They don't want even a single instance of loss. Longing for the impossible in this way is the state of suffering itself.

We celebrate birthdays as aging-days because we want to bravely face illness-days and death-days; we want to lessen them and ultimately put an end to them. We must go all out and consistently strive to nurture our meditation so that we can get a good present of kusala on our aging-day, receive good illness-day presents whenever we are ill, and receive a beautiful death-day present on the day we die.

Our bodies torture us relentlessly, and in turn, we have to be relentless in using our bodies in order for them to be a means of getting these presents.

The death-day isn't far from the birthday.

Following birth, we are continuously changing due to *anicca,* and as such, we mature into old age little by little. We welcome in aging and illness at the same time that we are born into the world. Because we have to meet with them from the time we are little, we can say aging and illness are our childhood friends.

The body is forthright in showing aging, so we know when we've become old. As for the mind, it won't alert us to the fact. It may very well want us to get younger as time passes by.

Each year, there is a shorter distance between our metaphorical birthday and our death, compared to the previous year, so it's indisputable that our birthday is announcing that our death is getting nearer. Every time we reach our birthday, we pass a sign post from the Grim Reaper.

One reason that the birthday and death-day are not far apart from one another is we are living in a period in which the human lifespan has become greatly shortened. Another reason is if causes and conditions change for the worse we can die at any time, and things can change for the worse very quickly. We don't have time to be lost in amusement, forgetting this fact.

To put it in terms of ultimate reality, because *nāma-rūpa* is impermanent and is continuously arising and dissolving, every day is a birthday, and a death-day. We are repeatedly being born and dying as nāma-rūpa arises and dissolves. Life isn't for idly staring at birth, aging, illness, and death. We need to put it to good use without delay. Because we can have a birthday every day, we must do kusala every day.[1] That is to say, because we can call any given time our birthday, we always have to make use of *sati* as a time management tool so we can consistently act in ways that increase our merit.

[1] It is customary in Myanmar for one to do acts of merit on one's birthday.

Aging is unceasing.

Our age doesn't stand still after we are born. We can't tether it with a cord. We can't control it or stop it with modern technology. Age perpetually continues on. If we look at it from one perspective, things grow with age. From another perspective, though, things shrink. The older we get, the time that we have remaining to live decreases. Every minute that passes by leaves us with a minute less of the time we have left to live.

From the time we are little to when we get older, our age often brings delight to parents and others. They happily applaud it. If our virtue is good when we are very old, our age will still be acknowledged with joy, and we will continue to be loved, cherished, and respected.

On the other hand, when one's age becomes very advanced and presents with it a state of deterioration and decline, it disturbs others; this is also the case if we are ailing. Most react by being upset. The wisdom of *saṃvega* surfaces with the thought, "has the old age of decrepitude mercilessly destroyed the age of gracefulness and youthfulness?" Dhamma is the one thing we can have left when age and time dwindle down and start to run out on us.

If the owner of a precious gems shop, in an unguarded moment, has a one-hundred-thousand-dollar gemstone stolen from them, they will suffer because they didn't receive compensation for their merchandise. Likewise, the person who loses their time without getting the value of Dhamma in return for it will be downhearted and will suffer. And just as the gem seller is delighted when a buyer comes in and they make a sale, those who can end up with Dhamma in place of whatever time has gone by will be strengthened and gladdened.

If we deny aging, we'll end up feeling dejected.

As humans, there are two ways in which we should grow—in age, and in moral uprightness. No intentional effort is required to advance in age. We must grow old whether we are willing or not. There is no alternative but for the rope of old age to be pulled. The power of Dhamma, though, cannot increase on its own the way age does. If our age increases without Dhamma increasing, the older we get, the more frightened and dispirited we will become.

If we grow old without growing in Dhamma, we'll tend to deny aging. Many of us think that we can reject it. We shut it out without placing any value on it. We want to scream and shout, "Old man, get out of here and leave me alone." We'll feel insufficient having to grow old without Dhamma. And if we try to relive our youth as we deny our age, we will become even more diminished, completely lacking in grace and dignity.

The older, the more favorable and peaceful.

We have to deliberately strive to have pronounced moral uprightness and goodness. It can't happen automatically the way aging does. Similarly, our suffering cannot be reduced automatically by old age; it can only be reduced through the power of the Dhamma. Dhamma is the only means for overcoming *dukkha*. In order to excel in the Dhamma, we need sati and wisdom. Sati and wisdom are the most powerful influences on dukkha and on the world overall.

Moral integrity is achieved through *sīla, samādhi,* and *paññā,* man's threefold training. Sīla disciplines our speech and actions; samādhi, the mind; and *vipassanā* paññā, our perceptions. Instead of rejecting aging, we can gain inner wealth as we get older, but only if the development of our training increases along with our age. The older we get, the richer we'll become in our abilities and in our Dhamma practice. When our Dhamma practice becomes fruitful, we'll be satisfied with ourselves and others will be able to rely on and even treasure us.

Whatever happens to us, whatever we do, whatever we gain, and whatever we lose, the one thing we must do through it all is hold onto the Dhamma. This is the most important thing. We must persistently hold onto sati wisdom in order to make aging worth it, to receive the benefits of aging, to increase the value of life, to keep increasing the power of the Dhamma, and to always situate ourselves in favorable positions.

The auspiciousness of birth, aging, illness, and death.

The Burmese word, "mingala," used to denote that something is auspicious or a blessing, comes from the Pali word, "maṅgala." As is stated in the introductory verses of the Maṅgala Sutta, "sabbapāpavināsanaṁ"—an act that we can perform that allows us to diminish and ultimately be free from *akusala,* and one that can make all bad perish—is called a blessing. If we are free from unwholesome deeds, we can set our minds to do virtuous action. If we perform more kusala and avoid akusala, we will advance in Dhamma. So, virtuous actions can also be called blessings.

It is said that "mingala" can be divided into two types in the world — auspicious affairs (sumingala, or joyous occasions) and inauspicious affairs (dumingala, or occasions of grief). But we don't have to make this distinction from the perspective of Dhamma, where inauspiciousness is inapplicable to blessings. This is why we can see birth, aging, illness, and death as being auspicious.

The Buddha said that becoming (bhava), aging, illness, and death are true suffering. If we can reflect in a way to see these four things carefully with wisdom, we won't dare shamelessly commit unwholesome acts. We will restrain ourselves so as not to inadvertently slip up. We can be consistent and dauntless in our performance of virtuous actions. If we can be free from unwholesome deeds and make doing good deeds second nature, it will be our own personal experience of maṅgala. Becoming, aging, illness, and death are impelling us to restrain ourselves so we don't dare do akusala and so that we perform kusala without delay.

A birthday is also Dhamma.

The day on which we are born is similar to other days in that it occurs once a year, so we use the word "birthday" to set it apart. But, if we have sati wisdom, this word will take on a meaning that is grounded in Dhamma, and we will be able to differentiate between what is a true birthday and what is not.

Hearing "birthday," we think, "While I was being born I wasn't smiling. I was born like a refugee, incoherently screaming and crying. Prior to taking birth, I was cramped in my mother's womb for ten months. I couldn't make my frustrations known or do anything about them. The experience was beyond endurance. Before entering my mother's womb, I had to experience the pain of death in my previous existence." To the degree that we can use wisdom to reveal frightening points like these, understanding based on Dhamma will emerge.

To continue: "Before I was born my mother had to bear the heavy weight in her womb. Because she had much affection and compassion for me as I got on miserably in her womb, she had to consider me when deciding everything she ate and everywhere she went. I imposed on her entire lifestyle. My mother had to endure this suffering because of me. And as she was giving birth to me, she had to undergo excruciating pain." The word "birthday" reveals a long list of my mother's benevolent qualities.

"When I was born I didn't have a clue about these struggles that she went through for me. I didn't know or understand anything. I only had a hazy consciousness and couldn't do much of anything. If something was bothersome to me, all I could do was cry." The word "birthday" makes me recollect my helpless life as a refugee upon being born.

"And following my birth as I remained dependent on them, my parents, acting selflessly, made many sacrifices in order to protect and look after me. They took care of all my needs. They did everything they were capable of doing to help me become self-reliant. They steered me from doing wrong and guided me on all the things that I *should* do. They taught me all they knew. They then entrusted me to teachers so I could become properly educated, and so on." So, the word "birthday" reveals the gratitude I have for my parents—gratitude that I could never pay back in full.

"Birthday" also makes us see that aging and illness have been following close behind us this whole time, from the day we were born all the way to the present. Now, as we are confronting them, aging and illness are racing toward death, while death comes rushing to greet them. All sorts of dukkha comes swarming around us solely due to the fact that we were born. To the extent that we can develop our wisdom, we will see it. A birthday is the Dhamma.

There is no escape from aging, illness, and death.

Aging, illness, and death are the unwanted consequences that come with being born. No one can evade them. They've clutched onto us at birth. A mouse that has found itself in the paws of a cat no longer has an opportunity for freedom. The cat can gratify itself in all sorts of ways by playing with the mouse before devouring it. The *khandhas* are just like this. Once we have fallen into the cat's paws of birth, old age toys with us in many ways with a myriad of suffering, only to have death chew us up. There's no need to wonder if we can evade it. There's no doubt, death will be certain.

Since it's easy enough for us to say "birthday," given all of the unpleasant experiences associated with that word, then we should also try to have the courage to face aging, illness, and death head-on by using the words "aging-day," "illness-day," and "death-day." We have an aging-day every day. Our bodies don't suddenly appear aged due to the fact that the nature of old age is that we go from youthful to mature little by little, in a seemingly unnoticeable fashion. We must try to be heedful so we can be resolute in performing good deeds and dare to acknowledge that every day is an aging-day. Since turning fifty-five years old, I no longer refer to myself as "U Bazin." I don't simply use "Phone Gyi" anymore, either.[2] I will only use "Phone Gyi O Gyi."[3] This affirms and proclaims my old age.

We will have an illness-day every day, too. If we have a body, we have dis-ease. It's not noticeable because we are always changing and fixing our posture. If we try to remain in just one posture without changing it for a while, we'll experience soreness and discomfort. And if circumstances take a turn for the worse, serious diseases can manifest at any time. We must always hold onto sati wisdom so we can have the fortitude to see every day as an illness-day.

And we will certainly meet with our death-day. This, too, is unavoidable. If we are unwavering everyday with our Dhamma practice, we will be undaunted in the face of death. If we are meticulous in the present, our hearts will be serene in the future. There

[2] In Burmese, monastics use the terms "u bazin" and "phone gyi", both meaning "monk," as personal pronouns.
[3] Meaning "old monk", similar to a lay person calling themself an "old man."

isn't a method in the whole world that can make the realities of aging, illness, and death retreat.

Although some illnesses can be cured with the right medicine and skilled doctors, this is possible only when kamma, the master of life, allows it to be so. There comes a point in time when no medicine or doctors can help us anymore, leaving death as the only option.

There's absolutely no evading or running away from the realities of aging, illness, and death. There's nowhere in the sea, land, or air that we can hide to be free from them. The khandhas, which are fuel, would still be with us if we went somewhere to hide, and when there is fuel, the fires of aging, illness, and death will burn. If there is a birthday, we have to accept that there will also be a death-day.

A birthday blessing gem.

If we can refine our actions with sati wisdom to be free from akusala, and if we can add in kusala on top of that, it will lead to an auspicious birthday, whether that's an actual birthday, or a figure of speech referring to an illness-day.

We pronounce the Pali word for gem, "ratana," as "yadana" in Myanmar. When we perform virtuous actions our minds become gladdened; it makes us joyous and brings a smile to our face. For this reason, we can call all merit-making "yadana." There's nothing in the world that makes us feel happier and more uplifted than being virtuous. It can even give us something our parents could not. And it can give us something money can't buy. Additionally, it can resolve all of our difficulties. It can dispel all danger and worry and even keep them from arising in the first place. That's why there's nothing more satisfying than doing virtuous actions.

When we do acts of merit, our heart is worthy of admiration and respect. Every time we reflect on the good we have done, the benefits increase even more, as does our strength. That's why we can call it a gem.

Another reason we call kusala a gem is because it increases in value. When we come to a crisis in life, we can count on it more than our relatives. Its value is worth multitudes more than money and material things of the world. It gives both worldly and transcendent benefits that can't decrease. The rewards are enormous. And if one's kamma is really good, they will be even greater.

What's more, it's a gem because no matter what situation we are faced with, if we have kusala, we'll end up with a win. Performing virtuous actions has such great power because in order to do a good deed, we must first overcome *lobha, dosa,* and *moha,* which are incredibly powerful themselves. Kusala can resolve and prevent difficulties that relatives can't fix, difficulties that can't be solved even with a lot of money and material things, and difficulties that can't be stopped by anybody's command. It is truly amazing what transpires if we can really utilize our goodwill.

Kusala is a gem because it is a rare thing that is difficult to actualize and experience in the heart. Because it's easy to find lobha, dosa, and moha in the heart of a puthujjana, it's very easy for them to do akusala. They can commit an act of akusala without much regard.

it's quite difficult for good qualities such as *saddha,* sati, and wisdom to reach their minds, and it's equally difficult for their hearts to feel prompted to perform acts of merit. In the duration of a day, ordinary puthujjanas spend more time doing akusala than kusala. But good deeds are many times more powerful than bad deeds because they are treasures that come only from conquering one's own mind.

Lastly, kusala is truly a gem because it's possessed by people of a higher class. Kusala is a matter only for those with high morality. Kusala can't come out of a lesser heart that is led by lobha, dosa, and moha. If we want to make a donation, we should cultivate a high-grade heart that is qualified to do so— one that is guided by conviction, goodwill, and wisdom. And if we're going to strive to develop in sīla, samādhi, and paññā, we must have a worthy and good heart. It's like buying goods. Only a high-class mindset can meet the expense of high-class kusala, and only high-class kusala can produce incredible outcomes of kamma. To overcome a lower mindset, we must have an ample high-class mindset. This is achieved by always holding firmly to the wisdom that springs from sati, which is high-class Dhamma. The cultivation of the *pāramis* is a job of people of high-class.

May you all see your benefits blossom and increase your abundance of gems.

Tipitaka Yaw Sayadaw
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Glossary

Akusala: Bad action, demerit; unskillful, unwholesome.

Anicca: Impermanent, inconstant.

Dosa: Anger.

Dukkha: Stress, discomfort, suffering—brought on by birth, aging, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair; association with the unbeloved; separation from the loved; and not getting what is wanted. In brief, the five clinging-aggregates are dukkha. [Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Saṁyutta Nikāya 56:11].

Kamma: Intention—expressed through physical action, speech, or thought. [Nibbedhika Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya 6:63].

Khandhas: Aggregates, which condition the appearance of life in any form. There are five: rūpa (physical form); vedanā (three modes of feeling—pleasure, pain, or indifferent); saññā (perception); saṅkhāra (thought construct), and viññāṇa (consciousness).

Kusala: Virtue, good action, merit; skillful, wholesome.

Lobha: Greed.

Moha: Delusion.

Nāma-rūpa: Name and form. "Name" being feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention, and "form" being the four great elements, and the form dependent on the four great elements. [Paṭiccasamuppāda Vibhaṅga Sutta, Saṁyutta Nikāya 12:2].

Paññā: Understanding, wisdom, insight.

Pāramis: Qualities to be developed that support the path to awakening: Dāna (generosity), Sīla (virtue), Nekkhamma (renunciation of sensuality, and of the household life for monastics), Paññā (wisdom), Viriya (persistence), Khanti (patience, forbearance), Sacca (truthfulness), Adhiṭṭhāna (determination), Mettā (goodwill), Upekkhā (equanimity).

Puthujjana: One who hasn't yet attained one of the four levels of awakening (sotāpanna, sakadāgāmī, anāgāmī, and arahant).

Saddha: Conviction.

Samādhi: Concentration.

Saṃvega: A feeling of shock and dismay over the predicament of saṁsāra, and a sense of urgency to find an escape.

Sati: Memory, mindfulness.

Sīla: Virtue; moral practice.

Vipassanā: Insight.

Tipitaka Yaw Sayadaw

Yaw Sayadaw (Ashin Sirindabhivamsa) was born in Letpan Village, Gangaw Township, Magwe Division, Myanmar on March 26, 1943 (the 6th Waning day of the month of TaBaung, in Myanmar Era 1304) to parents U Ye Naing and Daw Toke Khaing. He became a novice at age fourteen and again at age eighteen, and was fully ordained at the age of twenty with the name Ashin Sirinda. He went on to continue his studies of the Pāli Tipiṭaka, its commentaries, and subcommentaries in Mandalay and Yangon. Sayadaw's decades' worth of extensive study of the Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma Piṭakas at the highest levels culminated in him being awarded the title of Tipiṭakadhara Tipiṭakakawida, or, "One who knows the Tipiṭaka by heart." Sayadaw is currently the abbot of Mahavisuddharama TaikThit Monastery in Yangon, and oversees several other monasteries in Myanmar.